Kitchen managers Nicole Young and Cesar Herbert in front of Arbor Brewing Company. Arbor Brewing is looking close to home for many of the ingredients on its menu. Summer's bounty makes that easier.

Local bounty on area menus

Produce, meats from local farms popular

BY JANET MILLER
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Local restaurants are finding that they don't have to go across the U.S. border or even to California or Florida for their strawberries. Local chefs are looking close to home for these red jewels along with a whole lot more, from radishes to potatoes.

The buy local movement has come to area restaurants as their emerging summer menus begin to reflect a Michigan bounty. While Zingerman's Roadhouse in Ann Arbor is well known for turning to local Cornman Farms for much of its produce, other area restaurants are also shopping local and Michigan farms.

When Bee Mayhew opened "Beezy's Cafe" in downtown Ypsilanti six months ago, her goal was to have 90 percent of her menu from Michigan within three years. If it's not grown in the state, she at least wants it to come from a distributor in the state, she said. "And the closer to home the better."

For Mayhew, that has meant weekly trips to the Ypsilanti Farmers Market for salad greens and herbs. She buys chard and kale, garlic and herbs such as thyme, cilantro and sage.

She also plans to gather her staff to pick strawberries at a local farm. She'll use the berries on her menu but also plans on turning them into jelly and jams that she will serve at the restaurant. And come August, she plans to buy tomatoes, watermelon, beans and more.

The local bounty helps drive Beezy's menu, heavy on soups and salads and breakfast food. Local produce will especially influence the specials, Mayhew said. Spinach from Growing Hope in Ypsilanti resulted in a vegan lemon spinach soup along with ricotta filling vegetarian lasagna, Mayhew said. An unexpected harvest of thyme from Growing Hope allowed Mayhew to use fresh herbs rather than dried in her popular cream of mushroom soup.

"It was so much livelier," Mayhew said.

Mayhew looks locally for more than just her produce, however. She shops the Ypsilanti Food Coop for ingredients such as oatmeal and visits Dos Hermanos, a local Mexican grocer. Her honey comes from the farmers market.

Buying local comes naturally for Mayhew. She has never had a driver's license and has always looked close to home to meet her needs. "I've always been a localvore," she said. "For me, it's totally practical."

When Rene and Matt Greff decided to revamp their Arbor Brewing Company menu one-and-a-half years ago, they wanted to offer more natural ingredients but also more local products. And while frequent trips to the Ann Arbor Farmers Market provided unworkable – the quantities they needed just weren't available – they now try to stick to Michigan-grown produce and let the local bounty help determine what's on the menu.

Rene credits the menu shift to a double-digit increase in business, even with the sour economy.

"People appreciate that we buy local and that it tastes better," she said.

Michigan potatoes, said

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Produce a popular choice

kitchen manager Nicole Young, played a starring role in Arbor Brewing Company's kitchen from last July through this May, when they finally ran out. Throughout the year, there were iterations of potatoes, from mashed parsnip potatoes to cheesy mashed potatoes.

It's easier to incorporate produce from nearby farms – with their short seasons and inconsistent supply – on the monthly specials menu, said Melissa Chalmers, general manager.

Strawberries, for instance, will be used for the June special of strawberry salad, a cold mix of local organic spring greens, Zingerman's goat cheese, shredded radishes and local strawberries. Also featured this month is a locally grown snow or sugar pea salad, blanched and chilled with a sesame chili dressing sitting on a bed of lettuce.

Later in the summer, local tomatoes will be used in fresh salsa, gazpacho and enchilada sauce. Come fall, local parsnips can be turned into fritters and radishes into salads.

Arbor Brewing now makes many of its products from scratch, from tortillas to salad dressings and sauces. They use a local bakery for their bread and a local dairy for their milk products.

And they use a Jackson farm for their grass-fed, free-range beef, buying whole cows and letting the different cuts dictate the menu. While a whole cow yields the ground beef Arbor Brewing needs for burgers, it also produces a number of cuts they hadn't typically served.

This has seen the brew pub offer new specials, such as steak pitas, steak fajitas and roast beef sandwiches, Young said. "You have to think about all of the pieces of meat."

Janet Miller is a freelance writer.